



Evaluation of the FREEDOM Support Act Undergraduate Program

Executive Report

May 2003

PURPOSE OF THE EVALUATION

In September 2001, the U.S. Department of State's Office of Policy and Evaluation in the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) selected Aguirre International to conduct an evaluation of the FSA Undergraduate Program (FSA Ugrad program). The focus of the evaluation was to document the outcomes of the program, to assess its impact, and to link these outcomes and impacts to the legislative mandates under which the program operates.

The FSA Ugrad program is a year-long academic exchange program for second and third year university students from the countries of the former Soviet Union (NIS). The program is funded through the FREEDOM ("Freedom for Russian and Emerging Eurasian Democracies and Markets") Support Act of 1992, which supports activities that contribute to economic and democratic reform and development in the countries of the former Soviet Union.

Since the program's inception in 1993, almost 2,000 students from the twelve NIS countries have attended American universities and colleges, participated in internships, been involved in community service activities, learned about life and culture in the United States, made enduring friendships, and incorporated these new experiences and perspectives into their lives back home.

OVERALL ASSESSMENT

"The USA is an amazing country of good will, hospitality, a functioning government and economy, and most of all, people. I loved America."

The words of this one Uzbek alumnus speak volumes about the value of first-hand experience in the United States in promoting mutual understanding and appreciation.

But the goals of the FSA Ugrad program go beyond "loving" America – the program is explicitly funded with the intent of assisting NIS countries as they find their own path through the economic and political transition. The program does this by furnishing the opportunity to acquire new knowledge, skills, and experiences to extraordinary individuals who then return to their home countries and do something "differently" from their peers.

Almost without exception, alumni are satisfied with the program, and feel that it met their expectations. They learned both positive and negative things about life in the United States and acquired a more balanced and tempered view of the culture, of the market economy, and of how democracy works. They say that what they learned in their internships and in their community service is useful for their lives back home and that they have become better leaders because of the program. They give high marks to the utility of the program in improving their professional abilities, in learning new skills, in learning to work in a team, and in preparing for their future

careers. Consistent with this, they report that they are better off than their peers, *and attribute this directly to their participation in the program.*

All this is strong testimony to a belief in the program, but does not in and of itself constitute evidence that the alumni are in fact different from their non-participating peers. The real test of the impact of the program comes in the comparison of their skills, attitudes, and behaviors with those of their peers who did not participate in the program.

Using a sample of semi-finalists as well as a random cohort of university students who never applied to any exchange program as comparison groups, the evaluation clearly demonstrates that the program is reinforcing and developing competencies necessary for successful participation in the new market economies, fostering leadership skills, increasing engagement in civil society, improving understanding of the United States, and creating enduring ties with U.S. institutions and with American citizens. The program alumni are indeed different.

They are significantly more likely than the semi-finalists and the random cohort to:

- give stronger self-assessments on a whole battery of life skills associated both with leadership and with success in a modern workplace (for example, the ability to solve unexpected problems, change plans to adapt to opportunities, willingness to take risks, ability to lead a team);
- to be employed, and, when employed, to be in the international sector;
- to be actively engaged in community service;
- to hold more positive opinions about the quality of life in the United States and American values; and
- to have stronger linkages to the United States (excluding those linkages forged on the program).

Aguirre International therefore concludes that the FSA Undergraduate program is successfully fulfilling its mandate in supporting both market reform and democratic institutions and attitudes, and recommends that it continue to be one of the hallmark exchange programs between the United States and the NIS region.

PROGRAM GOALS

The FSA Ugrad program shares the same overarching legislative goals as other NIS programs funded by ECA, which are to

- contribute to economic and democratic reform and development in the independent states of the former Soviet Union, as specified in the FREEDOM Support Act (FSA) legislation; and
- contribute to the broader mission of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs in promoting mutual understanding through exchange activity, as mandated by the Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange (Fulbright-Hays) Act of 1961.

The more specific goals of the program are listed below, with the longer-term goals first.

- FSA Ugrad students will show a willingness and commitment to serve as agents of change in their countries after they return home.

- FSA Ugrad students will acquire an understanding of important elements of a civil society and will continue to espouse these values at home.
- FSA Ugrad students will generate enduring ties with Americans from the program and will actively forge new links with Americans and the United States.
- FSA Ugrad students will improve their: (a) effective use of resources; (b) interpersonal skills; (c) use and dissemination of information; (d) ability to see interrelationships and a wider perspective; and (e) use of technology.
- FSA Ugrad students will develop an appreciation for or understanding of American culture.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Applicants from NIS countries in their first or second year of university study enter extremely competitive merit-based competitions that assess their academic excellence, leadership potential, and proficiency in English. Once selected, students are placed at community colleges, four-year colleges, and universities throughout the United States, which are also selected through competition. Second year students (first year applicants) are automatically placed at community colleges, and generally live with host families. Third year students attend four-year institutions and live in dorms or off-campus apartments.

For their academic program, students concentrate in selected fields identified by ECA, including such areas as business, communications and journalism, computer science, economics, education, ESL/TEFL, government and political science, social work, and sociology. During the year, FSA Ugrad students also participate in an internship that supports and expands the academic component of the program. Since 1998, students have also been required to actively engage in community service. The rationale is that community service not only gives students a richer view of America, but helps them understand the importance of civil society in the development of their own countries and gives them the skills to organize and participate in a nascent civil society at home.

From 1992 until 2002, the program was administered by American Councils for International Education (ACTR/ACCELS). American Councils subcontracted the community college portion of the program to Youth for Understanding (YFU). The American Collegiate Consortium (ACC) – now defunct – also administered a portion of the program from 1992 to 1996. In April 2002, The International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) assumed full administration of the current FSA Ugrad program. American Councils, using residuals from prior grants, continues to work with the alumni through planned alumni activities.

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

The evaluation was conducted between March and August 2002 in six of the twelve countries covered by the program -- Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan – and employed three principal data collection strategies:

- a comparative face-to-face (interview) survey of FSA Ugrad alumni, semi-finalists and a randomly selected cohort of university-aged youth;
- focus groups of alumni and semi-finalists; and
- open-ended interviews with program officers and other key informants.

The survey instruments were designed by Aguirre International, vetted by ECA and the implementing partners, and field-tested with FLEX (ECA's high school exchange) program alumni. Aguirre International subcontracted with the Institute for Comparative Social Research (CESSI) in Russia and Ukraine, the Armenian Sociological Association in Armenia, Centre Qafqaz in Azerbaijan, M-Vector in Kyrgyzstan and Expert Fikri in Uzbekistan to conduct the in-country interviews. Interviews were conducted in the language of choice of the interviewee (Armenian, Azeri, Kyrgyz, Russian, Ukrainian, and Uzbek). In total, the survey teams completed interviews with *484 alumni, 333 semi-finalists, and 353 random cohort participants*.

Subsequent comparisons of the alumni sample and the semi-finalist sample with the alumni and semi-finalist populations revealed that both samples were strong and accurate representations of the larger populations in terms of key demographic variables. A randomly selected cohort of youth similar to both the alumni and semi-finalists in terms of age and university training, but differing in terms of their interest in participating in international exchange programs – served as yet another comparison group. Based on the validity of the samples, the evaluators are confident in the robustness of the analysis, and believe that the survey results give an accurate view of the activities, aspirations, and opinions of the different groups.

After the completion of the survey, the Aguirre evaluation team conducted eighteen focus groups – two each in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan; four in Ukraine; and six in Russia. Half the groups were conducted with alumni, the other half with semi-finalists. The focus groups were specifically timed to shed light on unexpected and unusual findings that emerged during the analysis stage. Finally, the evaluators met with program officials and participants in a variety of venues during the fieldwork period.

PROGRAM FINDINGS

The FSA Ugrad program has clearly been a positive experience for nearly all of the alumni. Overall, 99% are satisfied or very satisfied with their experience, and nearly 92% of alumni say that the program met most or all of their goals. Alumni explicitly state that the program has had an impact on their plans and expectations, and moreover, believe that they are better off than their peer in terms of their education and their work, and attribute that better status to this program. Seventy-three percent of the alumni believe that they are better off than their peers, compared to nearly 49% of the semi-finalists and 29% of the random cohort.

Table 1 - Status Comparison to Peers			
Status	Alumni (%)	Semi-finalists (%)	Random Cohort (%)
Better	73.1	48.6	28.6
Same	26.2	50.2	64.9
Worse	0.0	1.2	6.5

Note: some alumni were unsure as to their status vis-à-vis their peers.

Far more importantly, the FSA Ugrad program is meeting both its immediate and longer-term goals. The alumni show evidence of change directly as a result of the program *and* incorporate these newly acquired skills, attitudes, and beliefs into their private and professional lives in their home countries.

<p><i>Goal 1: FSA Ugrad students will show willingness and a commitment to serve as agents of change in their countries after they return home.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alumni give stronger self-assessments on a whole battery of life skills associated with leadership. For all 12 items, the alumni are more positive about their skills than the random cohort. More importantly, they are more likely to give themselves an excellent rating than the semi-finalists on 10 of the 12 items. • Alumni are more likely to be employed: 75% of the alumni are currently working, compared to 69% of the semi-finalists and 58% of the random cohort. • Alumni are more likely to work in the private sector: 64% of the alumni work in business, compared to 50% of semi-finalists and 49% of the random cohort. Within the private sector, FSA alumni are more likely to be working for international firms: 64% of alumni versus 16% of semi-finalists and 4% of the random cohort. • Alumni are more likely to be active in community service: 43% of alumni are involved in community service activities compared to 30% of semi-finalists and 20% of the random cohort. Moreover, the definitions of community service and the motivations for participating are very different for the different groups. For the alumni, community service “comes from the heart.”
<p><i>I feel the need to do this [volunteer work] from my heart. It is not like before when we were forced to do it.</i> -Ukrainian alumna</p>	
<p><i>Goal 2: FSA Ugrad students will acquire an understanding of important elements of a civil society and will espouse these values at home.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alumni are more likely than their peers to espouse values that are consistent with a well-developed civil society: they are less likely to believe that it is always or almost always justifiable to avoid paying taxes (6% versus 12% and 12%). They are also more likely not to condone the paying of bribes in return for services; 73% said it was never justifiable, compared to 71% of semi-finalists and 57% of the random cohort. • Alumni and semi-finalists differ significantly from the random cohort (but not from each other) in their attitudes towards financing political campaigns, the importance of voting, the role of the legislature, an independent media, the distribution of wealth, the value of welfare versus high taxes, and the role of government regulation versus self-reliance. Alumni are significantly more likely than both semi-finalists and the random cohort to support equal rights for all citizens, regardless of the circumstances (74% of alumni, versus 71% of semi-finalists and 61% of the random cohort). • Alumni have a distinctly different understanding of the experience of living in the United States; they are less likely than both the semi-finalists and the random cohort to believe that the United States is a violent country (6%, 11%, and 29%, respectively), that Americans care only about material things (41%, 48%, and 63%), and are more likely to believe that Americans have friendly attitudes towards their countries (89%, 83%, and 66%). • Alumni do not differ from the semi-finalists in their attitudes about the more formal characteristics of the United States (for example, that the United States is a functioning democracy or that Americans rely on a system of laws to protect the individual), but they both differ significantly from the random cohort.

<p><i>I work in a private business. From my own experience, I know that some things are impossible to solve without bribes. I feel disgust every time I address some of these authorities and hear the insinuations.</i></p> <p>-Ukrainian alumnus</p>	
<p><i>Goal 3: FSA Ugrad students will generate enduring ties with Americans and will actively forge new links with the United States.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alumni generate lasting ties with the people they met during their stay in the United States. Within the past year, 90% of alumni received at least one letter from American friends, and 76% received 10 or more. Twenty-four percent had at least one American visitor, and 4% had more than 10. • Alumni are far more likely than either semi-finalists or the random cohort to have contacts with American expatriates (64%, 48%, and 15%, respectively), to be in contact with U.S. businesses (41%, 25%, and 3%), to use U.S. websites (93%, 76%, and 29%), and to have traveled to the United States (17%, 14%, and 1%).
<p><i>After my return, I began to work in a bank and participated in the activities of the USA-Russia Investment Fund.</i></p> <p>-Russian alum</p>	
<p><i>Goal 4: FSA Ugrad students will improve their effective use of resources, interpersonal skills, use and dissemination of information, ability to see interrelationships and develop a wider perspective, and use of technology.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Since their Ugrad experience, the number of alumni who report “excellent” or “good” skills in the following areas has increased dramatically: reliance on own capabilities, resources or judgment (43% increase); setting up and working within a budget (31% increase); negotiating with fellow students or workers (24% increase); the ability to work closely with people different from them (23% increase); the ability to lead a team (36% increase); changing plans to adapt to opportunities (29% increase); knowing how to advance a career (48% increase). • Moreover, alumni report that the program was “very useful” or “useful” for improving their professional abilities (95%), preparing for a career (94%), acquiring new skills/techniques for work (98%), and learning to work in a team context (83%). • In response to open-ended questions about how they changed as a result of the program, alumni most frequently reported that it helped them to become self-sufficient, to broaden their horizons, and to solidify their career plans.
<p><i>A guy from my team graduated from the Institute for National Economy with an excellent record and now is working in the field of international relations. He wears a suit, has a nice briefcase. But he can do nothing, just nothing. He is just an assistant. Five more years will pass and he will become something. But during these five years, we, people from FSA, will do much more than the whole Council of Ministers.</i></p> <p>-Ukrainian alumnus</p>	

<p><i>Goal 5: FSA Ugrad students will develop an appreciation for or understanding of American culture.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alumni say that they have a better understanding of American culture as a result of the program (100%), American politics (94%) and American economics (89%). • In responding to an open-ended question about what surprised them the most about the United States during their stay, alumni give answers indicating a breaking of stereotypes and more sophisticated understanding of the contradictions in American society.
<p><i>We are almost Americans. How will we be able to fight against our course-mates? We are Americanized completely. I am not talking about our way of life, I am talking about our mentality. If tomorrow I become the Finance Minister of Armenia, of course, relations between our countries will be perfect.</i></p> <p>-Armenian alumnus</p>	

A PLAN FOR THE FUTURE

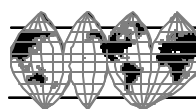
As the FSA Ugrad program plans for the future, the program has the opportunity to reinforce the experience through alumni activities and ensure that the long-term goals of the program are truly met. Alumni are clearly most interested in pursuing their new-found professional identities through alumni activities – they just need the opportunity. For example, they are far more interested in professional development opportunities, access to job banks, and job fairs than they are in the more social (and also more charitable) possibilities.

The logic behind the program is to give extraordinary individuals the opportunity to become different, and in turn, to return home and *make a difference*. The first step is clearly taking place: alumni are indeed different as a result of the program experience. They are only now moving into professional and community positions where they can influence real institutional change and reform. It is the program's job to continue to assist them.

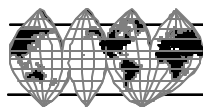
Prepared for:
Office of Policy and Evaluation
Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs
U.S. Department of State

By:
Aguirre International
1156 15th Street NW, Suite 1000
Washington, DC 20005

For a complete copy of the report, please contact the Office of Policy and Evaluation at (202) 619-5307 or by email (evaluations@pd.state.gov).



**AGUIRRE
INTERNATIONAL**



**AGUIRRE
INTERNATIONAL**

**1156 15th Street, NW, Suite 1000
Washington, DC 20005**